

# Tears from the Sea

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CRYSTAL FLETCHER

*“Tears from the Sea” est un texte signé Kawi, une gitane de la mer de Burma dont la vie est insufflée de la beauté et de l’esprit de la mer. Ce roman explore le combat de Kawi qui est aux prises avec la douleur d’avoir perdu sa famille, sa culture et son innocence dans un tsunami.*

## Final Moments—

I don’t know what it was about that morning that was different. Perhaps it was the delicious feeling of rebellion or simple curiosity that led me to stray from my family. It was something I never did. My calling was always the sea but on that day the land called me. And true to my instinct I followed....

Our kabang was anchored 100 metres off the coast of a tiny island—the whiteness of its sandy beach teasingly close. Papa and my three brothers were sitting on the deck repairing harpoons and animatedly reliving the morning fishing excursion. On top of the kabang’s thatched roof Mama was busy meticulously laying the mornings catch of fish amongst the already drying sea cucumbers and squid. This was a job both my sister Iphim and I usually assisted her with, but for some reason Mama had permitted us to abandon early in favour of seaside play.

Iphim and I were wandering the beach with rattan sticks, absently poking the ground in search of sea crabs and sand worms which to our utter disappointment were not to be found. That morning we were the only creatures straddling the world between the land and sea. Frustrated, Iphim announced to me, “Kawi, I don’t like this island, there’s no sand worms. Where are the sand worms? Where are the crabs?” Iphim was whinnying now, “I’m going back to the boat to ask Mama where all the animals are?” Iphim tossed down her stick and stomped her little feet sinking deep in the wet sand before she broke into a run sending water over her head until the depths of the water got the best of her and she had to swim.

I watched the splash of Iphim’s strokes, temporarily bored

at being alone. I looked down at my feet taking pleasure in digging my toes into the wetness and then watching the waves settle into the tiny toe holes I had created. I ran along the water’s edge trying out my land legs not yet ready to abandon the familiarity of the sea. As my confidence grew so did my speed and the amusement of feeling the water wash over my running feet caused me to almost lose my balance and fall into the lapping waves. I laughed as the water erased the trail of my footprints—the only evidence of my presence on the deserted shoreline before I jumped into the hot dry white sand. My gait halted as I stumbled in the thickness of the sandy terrain but I pressed on, basking in the newness of my surroundings. I’d never been on land by myself and it was strangely thrilling and a bit scary; I felt like a trespasser. With a backward glance, my eyes were reassured as they spotted our kabang and Iphim tossing a leg over the side before she skillfully manoeuvred her tiny body on board. I had a twinge of guilt that evaporated into curiosity by the thick wall of jungle in front of me.

When I stood on the bow of the kabang and looked down into the Andaman Sea I knew with some certainty what was beneath me. But as I faced the jungle I wasn’t so sure. I paused to readjust my sarong, tightening the knot that held it firmly in place above my chest. Taking a deep breath, I reached forward with both hands to part the dense foliage before me, entering a world that was foreign.

It was challenging to walk but not impossible. Exhibiting extreme patience, I separated vines watching the placement of my feet, cognizant of fallen leaves, roots, and snakes. My ears listened for approaching footsteps and rattling leaves. Instead, I heard the joyous sound of birds in song and the thunderous trickle of water falling to the earth’s surface. Away from the direct rays of the sun, the air was cooler but my body was not immune to the humidity of the day and from the exertion of climbing and parting vines. Perspiration formed at my hairline and ran in one continuous current from the base of my neck, the length

of my spine, pooling in the crease of my buttocks before travelling downward over my thighs, behind my knees, down my calves, and around my ankles. By the time my perspiration had travelled my body, my eyes were stinging, my sarong was drenched, and the soles of my feet were caked in the mud of my sweat. I wasn't deterred—it felt good to be covered in sweat; it felt good that my entire body was physically responding to the challenge. I was beginning to anticipate the feeling of accomplishment when I reached the top and could see the kabang off in the distance and the sea in full view, not as I normally viewed

through my second rotation I saw movement slightly off the coast. It was a pod of dolphins; there was no play in their flight—they were heading seaward. I moved to the side of the hill taking shade beneath the jagged leaves of a palm. Suddenly overwhelmed by exhaustion, I rested my head against the rough bark of the palm, extending the privacy of my solitude for just a moment longer I told myself. As I drifted into a morning nap I wondered why the dolphins were heading to deeper water.

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The only audible sound was my breathing that seemed

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it at sea level. When I reached the top, I would stand in the very middle of the hill looking down and around at the world. I was planning my arrival, prematurely savouring the satisfaction.

I would call out to my family; they would hear my voice but they wouldn't know where it was coming from. They would stop repairing harpoons and drying fish and they would devote their full attention to locating where the sound of my voice was coming from. They would look and look and then with a smile of being the first able to locate me, Iphim would point my direction and squeal in delight, "There she is, there she is. On the top of that great hill." I would be frantically waving my arms, feet barely touching the ground, beaming with pride at my solo journey. Papa and Mama would be fiercely proud of my conquered territory. And my siblings would be excitedly begging Papa and Mama to trace my steps and join me on my hilltop.

I persisted upwards, relishing my impending success, my stride quickening at my newfound inspiration. Step by step, breath by breath I made it to the top of my hill. I felt invigorated and much to my surprise a reluctance to share my accomplishment with anyone else. When I looked down it took me a moment to locate my family's kabang, and when I did my chest swelled not only from pride but also a deep love for the people that called the kabang home.

The view from the hilltop, as I knew it would, proved to be magnificent. Hands at my sides I stood perfectly still, and then slowly turning in a complete circle, carefully digesting the view from all angles. From the top I could fully appreciate the vastness of my home; the power of the sea was intoxicating. Shielding my eyes, I looked up at the sun squinting at the brightness. Even though my stomach was growling I knew from its position it was still early. Halfway

to be accentuated by the stillness of the humid morning air. I felt exhilarated at my naughtiness and a slight twinge of guilt knowing my mother would be wondering where I was. Perhaps it was the guilt or the growing awareness of the quiet that irked at my core. For nature was always in song, never quiet and when it was quiet, danger was not far. I sat up abruptly processing the silence. Straining my ears for nature's reassurance that everything was as it should be. It was then I heard it—a faint rumbling, far off in the distance. I'd never heard anything like it before and I searched the horizon for the source and I saw two things that both amazed and disturbed me.

The sea had receded into the navel of the horizon exposing colourful corals, a bounty of seashells, and the flapping bodies of fish gasping on the exposed seabed. I also saw my family's kabang desperately try to navigate its way into deeper water and my eyes pooled with tears of angry abandonment. How dare they? How dare they leave me? I was just playing. I was coming back. As my anger mounted, I choked on the reality of what was unravelling before my eyes. It was the sea. The sea was angry like I'd never seen it before. I couldn't imagine what had angered the spirits. I was afraid, afraid of the sea, and the roar without rain. I was afraid for my family.

I watched the mad water close in on the kabang and I called out to my family, "Face them! Face the spirits Papa! Show them you are not frightened and they will let you be. Show them Mama, you are not scared. Please face them, please face them Pilar, Sarani, Jale. Face theeeemmmm! Pleease, Iphim please, pppllllease!" I didn't recognize my voice. I'd never heard it call out in fear.

My family did not stand a chance against the sea's fury. It was frothing from top to bottom. Fuelled by its anger, the wall of water ran screaming into the kabang, devouring it, then spitting out my family one by one as they were

effortlessly digested in the spiralling current. I watched in disbelief, raw that I had just witnessed a wave eat my family, terrified that if I moved everything would be real. As the pounding of waves higher than coconut trees powered toward the beach, I swore I could hear Pilar singing.

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Time passed as it does, oblivious to pain; time is a constant; it moves even when we are not able too. I'm not sure how long I lay on the ground, victim of an all-consuming sorrow that inhaled me before I was even aware what was happening. It was reflexive. I could hear the birds above the silence in my head and the stillness in my heart. It was still beating but breaking, piece by piece, until it shattered under the strain. My heart would not be able to survive the loss.

When the sun set that night I was still horizontal. The sunset had always been my favourite part of the day but tonight I didn't care, didn't see that life was going on, so I refused. I shut my eyes and prayed a wild animal would find me and feast upon my wounded body so I could join my family and I slept hopeful of my impending death.

I woke to the moon and thousands of stars staring down at me and I responded to their concern with a release of emotion that until then I had refused to let go. I lay on the ground still warm from the tropical sun and I cried, draining my body of all moisture—my body tightened by anguish convulsed against the ground digging it deeper into the parched earth. I kicked, I screamed, I cursed the spirits with vengeance. I hated them for taking my family and leaving me alone. My family was brave. They should have survived the angry sea, not be devoured by it. My family was good. They were honest and they loved me. I was crying again and I felt very alone. Who will love me? Who would take care of me? The realization that life as I had once known it would no longer be was a harsh reality I was only beginning to comprehend.

The full impact of being an orphan of the sea would come later—a reality I would be forced to deal with for the remainder of my existence. For the moment, the immediate loss of love was all I could deal with. My body, worn and bloodied from thrashing, stopped as abruptly as it started. My face and hair matted from the mixture of tears and mud hid any trace of emotion my face would have otherwise revealed. I rolled onto my side, hugging my knees to my chest, and put my thumb into my mouth, softly sucking, unable to taste the mud that was caked to it. I lay very still and I felt nothing.

There is stillness around me, surrounding me. All I can hear is the marching in my ears. At first they are faint, consistent footsteps but they become louder, more forceful. Until the persistence of their beat is all I can hear deep in my ears. The vibration of each step resonates through the confinement of my skull. With no place to go it bruises my brain. In my dreams, I saw reality. I gazed into the blackness of the night. The stars nonchalantly gleam as if nothing of any significance has transpired. The stars are all there; in

fact I believe there are more hanging onto the sky.

In the blackness I see their faces, the lines of concern that marked their brow as they called out to me, "Kawi, Kawi, where are you? We must leave. The spirits are angry and danger is on its way." Papa cries out through the salt-stained air. Iphim is crying and my brother's eyes anxiously scan the horizon for me.

Mama commands my siblings to stay put and she and Papa run ashore calling my name, "Kawi, Kawi, please hurry."

My footsteps have long since washed away from the shoreline leaving no trace of my whereabouts. They are frantic running up and down the beach. Both of their eyes periodically look to the water reading the pending danger everywhere, trying to gage how long they have to escape. Yet, they look on, desperate to find me. "She can't be far." Papa says to Mama, "She wouldn't venture from the beach."

The yellow orchid Mama is wearing behind her ear tumbles to the earth; her foot narrowly misses stomping its fragility into the sand. She thrusts mangrove branches aside peering into the thickness. Papa's eyes look to the horizon, his ears alert. "Alia we must go. The spirits are getting closer. I fear we have left it too late." Reluctantly they grasp each other's hands and sprint to the waiting kabang and their remaining children. My parents are weeping, leaving behind them a distressed trail of footprints pressed into a lagoon floor without any water. I know that they are crying for me and for the lives of the children they have sacrificed looking for me. The guilt demolishes my spirit just as the wave did my family.

When I woke from my nightmares I felt the tightness in my mouth. The inside of my mouth had wrapped itself around my tongue and refused to release it so when I tried to open it, the taste of fresh blood washed over my tongue and spilled into my throat. Horrified, I tried to sit and was hit with waves of dizziness that made me shut my eyes in an attempt to stop my insides from moving. The enormity of my plight overwhelmed me even more than the tunnel of dizziness tugging at my vision. I was alone. My Mama was not there to pick me up in her arms and bring fresh water to my lips. Lonely, desperate for the sound of another human's voice, paralyzed by grief, yet shocked with the clarity I knew that I wanted to survive. It was thirst that first drove me to leave my bed on the hill in search of fresh spring water and when I left, although I knew I would survive, I left a part of my spirit there. I lost my voice. A part of my essence went to the very sea I had once loved and I knew with absolute clarity I would never swim again.

Circumstance changed the way I looked at my surroundings. When I first walked up the hill I was an explorer excited by the newness. Adventure with the sole purpose to make it to the top. Yet today, walking down, my eyes were instinctively surveying the landscape for food and materials to build a shelter; my eyes and ears adeptly

tuned to source out possible danger. I heard it before I saw it—the soft trickling of water meandering over rocks. Following my ears I found the spring and threw myself into its freshness, gulping until the dryness in my stomach was replenished. Sitting in the middle, the coolness bringing me to life, I began the task of working caked mud from my hair and body, washing away the dirt of my grief downstream.

Only when I had finished scrubbing my sarong against one of the bigger flat stones and had hung it to dry did I sit and eat a banana from a nearby tree. I probably would not have been able to force the banana down had it not been for the 20 or so small blue butterflies fluttering around. I watched them admiring that their colour was a blue brighter than the sky, and they were so tiny I wondered what they did in the great rains. I would join these blue butterflies. The land would be my new home for there was no way that I would take to the water any time soon.

I had witnessed the anger of the spirits and I would stay put. I would become a land dweller until my people came for me. But I didn't know when that would be.

*Crystal Fletcher has a BA in History and a Post Graduate Diploma in International Marketing. After seven years in marketing, advertising, and public relations she abandoned the conventional career path in favor of the unknown. Her journey led her to Jakarta, Indonesia where she taught (English as-a-second-language for one year. Upon completion of her teaching contract, she embarked on a six-month adventure, backpacking to Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos and Myanmar. After 18 months abroad, transformed and open to possibilities, she decided to take another "leap of faith" and pursue her dream as a writer. She is currently trying to get her first novel, Tears from the Sea, published.*

## JANE TASKER

### Love Notes (A prose poem)

They were love notes, she told him. He watched her fingers stroke the ivories, one by one, her head bent close to the keyboard to catch the last whisper of sound. She would play three of four notes this way, then pick up her pen, and ink in the little tadpoles of music. Love notes for him, she said.

In the three months they had lived together, she had filled only one page of music, but this she played over and over, each note striking Henry's heart like a tremor. Sometimes the music was wild and passionate, sometimes so slow and elegiac that Henry would see the delicate strokes swim before his eyes and rest his hand on Elena's shoulder half in caress, and half in muted plea.

When he returned to the flat that day, there was nothing of Elena left except the single white page with its cryptic markings. He snatched it up and rushed back to the street hoping to hear some trace of teasing laughter, some returning click of her heels.

It was silent.

Henry stared down at the pavement. A street grate welled into darkness, its grills like the sieving maw of a whale. He crouched down and began to shred the sheet of music, dropping note by single note between the bars.

*Jane Tasker graduated from York University with an Honours B.A., summa cum laude and an Honours M.A. and is currently teaching Elements of Writing Style at Ryerson University. She is indebted to her mentors: Dr. Frances Beer, Dr. John Unnau, and Dr. Naomi Diamond.*